

CHANGES IN CHARLES OLSON'S "PROJECTIVE VERSE":
A SHARED EXPERIENCE

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Order, rhythm and balance simply
means that energies significant
for experience are acting at
their best.

(*Art and Experience*, John Dewey)

wash.dc april 21 50

my dear robert creeley:

Bill [Williams] too sez, write
creeley, he has ideas and wants to USE 'em

so what do i do? so i write so
ferrini sends creeley a lovely liquid thing, and creeley
says, he's a boll weevil, olson, just lookin' for a lang,
just lookin nuts, and
i says, creeley, you're
off yr trolley: a man
god damm well has to come up with his own lang, syntax
and song both, but also each poem under hand has its own
language, which is a vairant of same ((THIS IS THE
BATTLE: i wish very much, creeley, i had now to
send you what PNY publishes summer issue,
PROJECTIVE Verse vs. the NON-projective: the
argument pitches here
(I've dubbed the
alternative to composing by inherited forms
"composition by field" — it needs more examina-
tion than I give it, that kick-off piece))!

With these words, sent to Robert Creeley by Charles Olson, a correspon-
dence started which would develop into "one of the closest and most

productive of recent literary friendships"², and at a moment in their lives in which they were both trying to define their own individual poetics based on the examples set by Pound and Williams. Neither was absolutely clear on the direction to be taken but they both wanted to be able to establish a poetic language which would be specific to their own specific needs. Olson had already sent the first version of what would eventually become his essay "Projective Verse" to the editor of "Poetry New York" under the heading of "PROjective Verse vs. the NON-projective"; the essay had been sent back for revision and the letters exchanged throughout the following months would help to set out the final version of a text which would become the seminal poetics for the so-called "Projectivist" or "Black Mountain" poets. Using the correspondence covering that period, I will try to analyse the budding literary friendship between Creeley and Olson, and the extent of Creeley's contribution to the final text; Creeley was twenty-three at the time and Olson thirty-nine and they would not meet in person until Creeley, following Olson's invitation as rector, arrived at Black Mountain College to teach in March, 1954, four years later.

Together with his first letter, Olson sent Creeley some other poems — including a copy of his only published book of poems, *Y & X*— and Creeley's reaction to them, in his first letter to Olson, was much more enthusiastic, to the point of promising to include one, "Morning News", in the first issue of the magazine he was trying to bring out:

Have your poems at hand. These are too much —unlike what I had seen; forgive, etc. But the others didn't make it for me, and, perhaps, useless to go into that here. Except to say that you have my vote on the matters of language, etc.³.

The "matters of language" here referring to Olson's statement that each poet must "come up with his own lang., syntax and song both", echoed Williams ideas on "each speech having its own character the poetry it engenders will be peculiar to that speech also in its own intrinsic form", ideas which as we have already seen appealed to Creeley; Olson had continued: "but also each poem under hand has its own language", an idea which they would expand on later, and one which Creeley often quotes in relation to Olson.

In his next letter, four days later, Creeley again praised the poems in *Y & X* relating them to the influences he perceived in them: "I take you put down here movement beyond what the Dr., Stevens, etc., have made for us. Wonderful things.", and quoted Stevens on poetic form, their ongoing preoccupation:

Poetic form in its proper sense is a question of what appears within the poem itself ... By appearance within the poem itself one means the things created and existing there...⁴

In Stevens' formulation we can trace the basis of Creeley's "Form is never more

than an extension of content", which Creeley would soon mention to Olson. Creeley stressed the importance of Stevens' comments in the context of an attack on the defence of tradition made by T. S. Eliot and asking for the muchneeded advice form Olson:

Basic. Yet they won't see it, that it cannot be a box or a bag or what you will. Like Eliot: the imposition of tradition etc., etc. Both senses to apply. You *cannot* put 1 tradition on top of another, without losing what APPLIES in each... Like these idiots who will not take what *is* of use but insist on 'returns' &tc.

Anyhow — sick at heart.

So, then, must count on yourself to help me at times with this, by way of poetry, & criticism⁵.

The plea can be clearly inserted in Creeley's general concern and search in the work of other poets for ways to clarify and strengthen his own ideas, but it is in this case so strong as to give us ground to think that Creeley probably perceived the more mature Olson as something of a father figure in more ways than one (Creeley will very often sign off his letters as "yr lad"). Whatever the case, Creeley has always acknowledged the radical importance which Olson had in his life:

Olson, I believe, was a decisive influence upon me as a writer, because he taught me how to write. Not how to write poems that he wrote, but how to write poems that I write. This is a very curious and very specific difference⁶.

However, it is really Charles Olson I must thank for whatever *freedom* I have as a poet, and I would value him equally with Pound and Williams and those others I have mentioned⁷.

Olson was the first reader I had, the first man both sympathetic and articulate enough to give me a very clear sense of what the effect of my writing was, in a way that I could make use of it ... At the same time, his early senses of how I might make the line intimate to my own habits of speaking —that is, the groupings and whatnot that I was obviously involved with— was a great release for me ... it was Olson curiously enough in the "Projective Verse" piece ... who really made clear to me what the context of writing could be in a way that no other man had somehow ever quite managed⁶.

Up to the moment in which Creeley and Olson started writing to each other, Creeley was more of a short-story writer than a poet and it is important to point out how in the first poems he wrote during this period the influence of Olson's own style is clearly present. A poem in point is Creeley's "Hart Crane 2":

take off on his own on the wings of the "projective" method, discussed in and absorbed through the stream of letters Creeley and Olson exchanged. They knew that although Pound's and Williams' poetics was attractive, it only pointed in the direction they wanted to go; the "new" way would have to be explored and they both mentioned it to each other in their initial letters, as if to use each other as a sounding board for their ideas, finding out previously whether the other wanted to move in the same direction. Olson commented to Creeley: "Also, when you say, 'our own way'. right, right. love the Dr*, love the Master**, still, even they, are in the way There is new work to be done, new/work"¹¹; to which Creeley answered:

These letters from you: good to have the fact of your concerns, which, as it happens, mine. The distortion that can come in with an overemphasis or mistaking of EP's thought, or the Dr's for that matter: cripples many that wd be of use. This is not to protest that I have the word from God, etc: but that I'm capable of recognizing its misuse in the hands of others: which they might take as 'friend'. Usual. But sad, as in the case of Eliot and EP¹².

And, after thus establishing these concerns as common and the awareness that friendship might confuse the issues discussed, Creeley launched, further down in the same letter, into how a "program" should be established, taking the Imagist Manifesto as reference point:

Witness: the nature of the 3 precepts put down in 1912 re Imagism. I.e., exact, pointed, no fuzz, applicable. I take it: what a program should hit: NOT somebody else's 'method' (*the falsification of history*: real: but that which must be got to by way of a counter-method); not a prescription that those not sympathizing will not be tolerated (this wd follow like the night the day, etc.): BUT a statement of direction, of concern (BEYOND resentment), of method: which can attack, by its own nature, this falsification; and which can get beyond it to something to [be] made USE of, directly. There, the issue abt those not wanted, abt toleration, non-resentment, risk, & the like: wd be something to take seriously. Not 'I dont like newspapers' but 'this is exactly what I think they should be.' It brings things out in the open: demands clarity from us & form any possible readers ... I wd take it: a program must be clear enough to commit its backers to 'specifics', to avoid generalities, to avoid misunderstanding¹³.

The forcefulness of the expression shows Creeley riding high on the crest of an intellectual wave and, full of self confidence, before a week had passed he wrote again encouraging Olson to take the music played by jazz musicians like Charlie 'Bird' Parker, Max Roach, Miles Davis or Bud Powell as examples of

* Williams.

** Pound.

how a consciousness of sound and timing could lead to extending the form not by following patterns but with “what IS there, in any given instance”, through the personal perceptions and breath of the musicians. Although Olson did not at the time know the work of these jazz players, he was ecstatic in his reply, to the point of asking whether he could quote Creeley’s letter in his revision:

sat/ 5-27-50/ wash

cree-
ley:
tanks,
tanks,

especially wish i had sd (you will, you will!)¹⁴
“Two things we have yet to pick up on-with the head:
a feel for TIMING, for
SOUND

& when you hit,
these are an overt, they
were in it”

say, why don’t i slug that in, in copy? any objections?
introduced thus; “Creeley’s gloss, here, is helpful...”?

And adding, in a comment on a radio recording which he had done a few days before: “... when does the INformal become FORmal... The thing is, to go on, BY BREATH, hammering out the INform. & keep at it”¹⁵. Creeley thought about the matter and some days later wrote to Olson relating his words to Blake’s “Nature has no Outline, but Imagination has”¹⁶ and proposing “form is the outline of the imagination/ on what it takes to hand”, after decrying how the meaning of the words ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ had been corrupted and could only be considered as deadly:

“The ‘formal’ has killed what the head: might get into: in that it has put into menial/ enclosed/ work: what it sd have been determining, ONLY, as an extension of its center: in any given work. Which is to say: as now, in many, the insistence on an attention (FIRST) to possible castings for a content: has belied the content: or no more than the Dr’s implication re the suitability of the sonnet/ for our time, etc. Of a piece: it has to be¹⁷.

A text which, however cryptic it might appear on a first reading, clearly denies the traditional formula of deciding *a priori* on a form when the poet is going to write his poem, instead of allowing the content—the “center”—to generate the form. The concept was now clear in Creeley’s mind and a few days later it surfaced in his June 5th. letter:

...form has now become so useless a term/ that I blush to use it. I wd imply a little of Stevens' use (the things created *in* a poem and existing there...) & too, go over into: the possible casts or methods for a way into/ a 'subject': to make it clear: that form is never more than an *extension* of content. An enacted or possible 'stasis' for thought. Means to!⁸.

Clarifying, some lines below, what he meant by 'stasis': "which means no more than it: is held, in tension, the line of the intelligence as manifest by its expression", bringing together echoes of Olson's "tension of the line" and Pound's "logopoeia". Olson's reply followed swiftly:

... & now yr letter with at least one sentence to make me, to, create this cit. for this day plus:

.....
FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF
CONTENT,

&, try this on,

right form

is the precise & correct (only possible) extension of content under hand

.....
Anyhow, yrs

is beautiful, and most USABLE¹⁹

It was so "usable" that Olson ended up including it *verbatim* in his final version of "Projective Verse" —with the debt to Creeley openly acknowledged, of course—. A couple of weeks later Olson sent Creeley his ideas on what he termed "composition by field", and the relationships which existed between the mind, the ear, the syllable, the heart, and the line, polishing, condensing, and strengthening them in the four letters and postscripts sent over a two-day period. It is worth quoting the text virtually complete as it forms the basis of what would constitute a large section of the final "Projective Verse" essay, and Olson's comments, as he tries to convey his thoughts to Creeley, very often clarify the contexts left out in the final version:

The big baby, LINE—

it's the whole damned problem, in

COMPOSITION BY FIELD, this

keeping of the line PURE:

to undo free verse, its shittings,

we must hammer each line out as each SYLLABLE,

or we're dead ducks, like

the Amygists,

or even EZ, when, as so often, in the Cantos, he

goes by his will, thinks

that it will carry him, he's
so strong. It don't, &
IT WON'T.

Let me start, putting it, this way: the syllable
is spontaneous, in this sense, that the EAR sez the syllable
[added in ink:
(the ear, which has collected, which has "listened", around about]
(the ear, which is so close to the MIND, (they are as brother to sis), the
mind the drying force

"poetry
is the dance of the
intellect
among the syllables"

half right

It is incest, of which half the SINGLE INTELLIGENCE is born: fr the
mind and the ear, comes, sharp, the 1st of twins (always, Egyptians
produced
twins, it seems)

The other, the other child (together one has SINGLE INTELLI-
GENCE—and a poem) is THE LINE, comes (I swear it) from the
breath, fr the breathing of the man who writes. And only he can
declare the line proper to him, its metric, and its point of ending—this

is where the work comes in, this is THE WORK, the beating out,
the hammering (of which we die)

.....I have a hunch that, emotion being what it is, its control on our
breathing is such, that any of us, who will stay out in the open, in the
OPEN FIELD, will, unknown to ourselves

(was not this how line-form
came into being in the 1st place—Sappho, or, the Canzone, say
(behind them both

declare, every so often,
unawares, a base beat and flow which will, order is such a part of the
law of rhythm, also declare itself.

And I hunch, that, when a poem
works, in the OPEN, it is just for this reason, of a controlling constant
against which all variants break and play²⁰.

.....

To come back. What I wrote to you yesterday on LINE, got neater,
later. Maybe too neat. But here it is, just for the go of it, and because I

think we do have to correct Remy de G[ourmont] and Ez, on this biz of, expression versus illumination. All the way thru I find em (including Ez's absolute ARS POETICA) half right. (They leave out one side of the thoroughfare, much-travelled side.)

At the moment—and maybe I'll go on, from PROVERSE, and do, what I threatened myself, OPEN FIELD COMP.—it comes out like this:

the two halves are,

the HEAD, by way of the EAR, to the SYLLABLE,

the HEART, by way of the BREATH, to the LINE

And the joker: that the 1st half is, the let-it-rip, in the act, howsoever one disciplines it othertimes

and the 2nd, is, the rewrite, the control, in the making, the *work of the day*²¹

.....
PS 3: for the restatement of *yest. & today:*
in poets,

*the SYLLABLE the sign of
intelligence,
the LINE the sign of
heart*

*& poetics, forward, is
a matter of, conspicuously,
KINETICS, all over*²²

Olson's first evident attack was on the "shittings" which "free verse" had brought about, a continuation of Pound's and Williams' apprehension on "free verse" becoming an excuse for looseness in writing, even though Williams had made it clear nearly ten years before —and this is where Olson carries on from him: "Free verse, therefore, so called, is a sign of change... toward a reworking of the materials under new conditions for an increased amplitude of opportunity, greater, more varied expression to suit a more complex time."²³ Olson's criticism of Pound is valid at the moment he writes this, but one has only to look at some of *The Maximus Poems*, written later, to see evidence of the same "drying force" of the mind:

Time's
unbearable complexity—as though our souls
could never be the equal of our bodies, its
devouring
occurring, at such a rate only knowing
Ho Kung says white and preserving
black (that the mystery-unity is seen only in the sun
—as against the Truth unity and
will make us unsuccessful
in the desire for death

(“And melancholy”)

The end of the first quote does not appear in the final essay, its defence of emotion as controlling the all-important breath which will generate the poetic line, seems most appropriate —specially in his comment, “was not this how line-form came into being in the 1st place”; it is a statement which Creeley will very often echo in his qualifications of what constitutes a good poem:

I believe, rather, that it is that complex of emotion evident by means of the poem, or by the response offered in that emotion so experienced, that is the most signal characteristic that a poem possesses. So, the measure of poetry is that emotion which it offers, and further, the quality of the articulation of that emotion —how it is felt, the fineness of its articulation²⁴.

I think it is interesting to point out how Olson left out all mention of “the rewrite” which we see in the second quote, changing it to “attention” in the final version, as though it were taboo. The explanation seems simple if we consider its context: “The HEART (seat of emotions or temporal beat?), by way of the BREATH, to the LINE”. Whichever way we take it the “HEART” will attend and control the line, and never be the source of any attempt to rewrite it; the rewriting which Olson carries out seems to be originated by his attempt to map the text on the page as a faithful representation of the measures perceived by the ear.

The last quote summarizes the ideas which will again be expanded in the final version, “I am dogmatic, that the head shows in the syllable. The dance of the intellect is there, among them, prose or verse ... And the threshing floor for the dance? Is it anything but the LINE?...”; ending with a first mention of one of the main principles of Projectivism: KINETICS.

Creeley, in a letter sent before he had received the above, comments interestingly on his own line:

"ab method/ the line. Well, to be straight with you/ it's only my breathing, as I write. And the residue of the formal, that hangs. I wd like someday, to write a line with this grip of stress ... The head cannot shape a line more than the ear can hear. Just, like they say, cant. Impossible. And the great sounds concurrent with, say, the Eliz. lyricists, etc., was just that method²⁵.

Obviously, both men share the same approach to the line, and Creeley's reaction to Olson's latter comments is vehement, with a spirited acceptance first, and —two days later— sending Olson a summary of Olson's ideas accompanied by his own remarks and suggestions:

Jesus—you hit, on these things ... am getting it in my head: the biz with the line. Field Comp/—can see it, now, as ONLY gig. Cannot stifle feel/grip: by preconceptions... ONLY as the coming out: makes it. Fair enough. But, as you sd, rework: tighten—line. Tighten: as the act of 'precision', being right-NOT cramped²⁶.

To Creeley's comment in the second letter: "...to keep energy at all point contemporary to both the people of the dialogue (which can translate to the: materials of yr poem) and yr reader.." Olson reacted by adding a pencilled note which would appear, with few changes, in the final revision:

"poem is energy transferred from where the poet got it, by way of the poem, to, all the way over to his reader. Okay? Then, the poem itself must, at all points, be, energy-discharge. So: how is the poet to accomplish same, energy, how is he, what is the process by which, a poet get[s] in, at all points, energy?²⁷

Two other comments made by Creeley were incorporated too. Olson had written, "The *objects* which occur, at moment of composition...", Creeley changed "composition" to "recognition" remarking, "you had composition—how abt that/same damn thing"; the final version reads: "The objects which occur at every given moment of composition (of recognition, we can call it)..."; and again, Creeley thought that the lines on "Observation of any kind..." should go with the section on description as a drainer of energy, and that is precisely where they will eventually appear²⁸. The revisions had virtually concluded and the final draft was again sent to Rolf Fjeld, the editor of "Poetry New York" where the essay would eventually come out, three months later, in October.

As we have seen in the previous pages the collaboration between both poets was very close and, although using Olson's original version of the "Projective Verse" essay as a platform for discussion of matters which interested them both, Creeley's intelligent and sensitive comments helped mold the final version of an essay which would become seminal in contemporary American poetry. The remarks made by George Butterick sum it up beautifully:

Each man allowed the other his head, took what came, and found of interest (or at least discussible) each other's preoccupations. Sometimes a dialogue ensued, other times one generously allowed himself to be used as a sounding board for the other's necessities. Together they hammered out a poetics—both the specialized craft of the wordsmith, but also the larger issue of how a man of language must live in the world²⁹.

William Carlos Williams' reaction to the reading of "Projective Verse" was so enthusiastic that he included the first five pages complete in his own *Autobiography*, remarking in a letter to Creeley:

I share your excitement, it is as if the whole area lifted. It's the sort of thing we are after and must have ... Everything in it leans on action, on the verb: one thing *leads* to another which is thereby activated³⁰.

A comment which vindicates their attempts at finding a new prosody, continuing where they felt Pound and Williams had left off, but always keeping in mind Pound's definition of prosody as "the articulation of the total sound in a poem".

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Notes

1. George F. Butterick, ed., *Charles Olson & Robert Creeley: The Complete Correspondence*, Vol. I, (Santa Barbara, Cal.; Black Sparrow Press, 1980), p. 19. The highly idiosyncratic spelling and punctuation has been respected by the editor and will, of course, be kept in the quotes without any marks such as (sic.).
2. George F. Butterick, "Creeley and Olson: The Beginning", "BOUNDARY 2", Spring/Fall, 1978, p. 129.
3. Butterick, *Complete Correspondence*, p. 20. (24 April 1950). I will include the date of each letter quoted at the end of the appropriate endnote.
4. Wallace Stevens in a symposium on "The State of American Writing, 1948", "Partisan Review" 15, August 1948, p. 85.
5. Butterick, *Complete Correspondence*, p. 22. (28 April 1950).
6. David Ossman, "Interview with Robert Creeley", in Robert Creeley, *Contexts of Poetry: Interviews 1961-1971*, (Donald Allen, ed.), (Bolinias, Cal.; Four Seasons Foundation, 1973), p. 5.
7. Robert Creeley, "I'm Given to Write Poems", in *A Sense of Measure*, (London; Calder and Boyars, 1973), p. 65.
8. Linda Wagner, "An Interview with Robert Creeley", in *The Poetics of the New American Poetry*, Donald Allen and Warren Tallman, eds., (New York; Grove Press, Inc., 1973), p. 291.
9. Cynthia Dubin Edelberg, *Robert Creeley's Poetry: A Critical Introduction*, (Albuquerque; University of New Mexico Press, 1978), p. 161.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 164, 165.
11. Butterick, *Complete Correspondence*, pp. 28, 29. (16 May 1950).
12. *Ibid.*, p. 30. (18 May 1950).
13. *Ibid.*, p. 34.
14. Echoing Whistler to Wilde: "I wish I had said that". "You will, Oscar, you will". (Butterick endnote).
15. *Ibid.*, p. 50.
16. William Blake, "The Ghost of Abel", in *Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, Geoffrey Keynes, ed., (Oxford; Clarendon Press, 1948), p. 584.
17. Butterick, *Complete Correspondence*, p. 63. (31 May 1950).
18. *Ibid.*, pp. 78, 79. (This is the first appearance of Creeley's famous definition of "form").
19. *Ibid.*, p. 85. (8 June 1950).
20. *Ibid.*, pp. 126, 127. (21 June 1950).
21. *Ibid.*, pp. 137, 138. (22 June 1950).
22. *Ibid.*, p. 143. (22 June 1950; 2nd letter that day).
23. William Carlos Williams, "Studiously Unprepared: Notes for Various Talks and Readings", edited by Paul Mariani, in "SULFUR 4", 1982, p. 33.
24. Wagner, p. 276.
25. Butterick, *Complete Correspondence*, p. 148. (24 June 1950).
26. George F. Butterick, ed., *Charles Olson & Robert Creeley: The Complete Correspondence*, Vol. II, (Santa Barbara, Cal.; Black Sparrow Press, 1980), p. 54. (5 July 1950).
27. *Ibid.*, p. 62. (7 July 1950).
28. *Ibid.*, p. 60.
29. Butterick, *Complete Correspondence*, Vol. I, p. xi.
30. Quoted by Creeley in his own introduction to Charles Olson's *Selected Writings*, (New York; New Directions, 1966), p. 6.